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Mayor Plans Birth To 8 Focus

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By Hartford Mayor Eddie A. Perez's estimate, there are about \$110 million of federal, state and city money being spent this year on the health and education of his city's youngest children. But the mayor also estimates that that money isn't being used efficiently - and isn't doing much to prepare children for school or to ensure that they are receiving adequate medical care in their formative years.

So on Monday, the mayor proposed creating a new city agency, under the auspices of his office, that would attempt to synchronize the 305 different programs and services that cater to the city's children from newborns to age 8.

"We don't have to re-invent the wheel, we're looking to enhance it," Perez said after a formal announcement of his "Blueprint for Young Children."

The announcement was a congratulatory affair, with Perez and educational leaders and specialists saluting their plan to better the welfare of the city's 18,000 children age 8 and younger.

Robert Henry, the superintendent of schools, estimated that 50 percent of the city's kindergartners begin school unprepared. Others cited studies that show that access to prenatal care and infant health care in the city is worse than most other places in Connecticut.

The mayor's solution: create a city Office for Young Children, with a paid staff of four, whose mission would be to ensure universal access to prenatal care, early childhood medical care and preschool programs.

Under the mayor's vision, the office would be far-reaching, with a say in the day-to-day development of all children in the city. He envisions medical professionals visiting homes of families with children under 5, and all families with young children enrolling in literacy courses and parenting classes.

The Office for Young Children, which will have its own director, will be required to submit an annual "children's budget" and issue a bi-annual report card on the status of early childhood in the city of Hartford.

The mayor is also proposing to create his own "Cabinet for Young Children," an expert group to advise him on children's affairs. This group includes the superintendent of schools and representatives of programs that offer health care, education and philanthropic support to the city's young children.

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